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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000910

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: REPORTS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS IN QUANG NGAI PROVINCE

¶11. (SBU) Following up on an earlier lead from a reliable contact in the Protestant house church movement, on August 22 we spoke with Dinh Ruong (strictly protect), a preacher in Quang Ngai Province of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). Ruong reported that an SECV church that ministered to local ethnic minority families in the Son Ha District of Quang Ngai had encountered severe police harassment. According to Ruong, after Sunday services on August 21, local authorities told the parishioners that they must renounce their faith or they would not be allowed to remain in the locality. Later in the day, individuals reportedly belonging to the local Veterans' Association burned down the home of the local preacher that doubled as the place of worship. Three years ago, that preacher had been expelled from another district in the province because of local official opposition to his proselytizing among the ethnic minority community.

¶12. (SBU) Ruong also reported on an apparently separate incident involving ethnic minority H're residing in Son Tay District near the provincial border with the Central Highlands province of Kontum. Ruong said that local district authorities for "some time" had pressed unsuccessfully for H're Protestants to renounce their faith. At the end of July, provincial authorities ordered 10 H're Protestant families to an area closer to the provincial capital "for better control" and reportedly destroyed their houses in their village. While some H're complied with the order, others refused to move, and others fled.

¶13. (SBU) An affiliate of the Chief Representative of the Quang Ngai SECV Representative Board confirmed the reports to us on August 26. This contact said that the Provincial Chief Representative would meet with the General Secretary of the SECV's National Executive Committee.

¶14. (SBU) The Chief of the Quang Ngai Committee for Religious Affairs refused to take our phone call on August 24. On August 26, we met with Phan Thu Hang, Pol/Econ Chief in the HCMC Office of External Relations. We handed over a letter requesting additional information on the incidents (letter emailed Embassy Hanoi and EAP/BCLTV). We stressed to Hang that the incidents -- if confirmed -- would be a serious violation of Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. That said, we understood that implementation of the new legal framework on religion by local authorities has been uneven, particularly in more remote areas. While provincial and other senior-level officials may not be able to prevent unfortunate incidents, how they respond once they have been alerted is critical. Hang undertook to contact provincial leaders and to provide us with a "clarification" as soon as possible.

WINNICK